

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 062

CE 055 159

AUTHOR Staiger, Ralph C.  
TITLE Developing the Reading Habit in Children. Literacy Lessons.  
INSTITUTION International Bureau of Education, Geneva (Switzerland).  
PUB DATE 90  
NOTE 17p.; For other "Literacy Lessons" booklets, see CE 055 128-167. Also available in French.  
AVAILABLE FROM International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.  
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Discussion; Early Childhood Education; Early Reading; Foreign Countries; Literature Appreciation; Parent Child Relationship; \*Parent Influence; \*Parents as Teachers; \*Prereading Experience; Reading Aloud to Others; Reading Attitudes; \*Reading Habits; \*Reading Readiness; Role Models; Young Children  
IDENTIFIERS International Literacy Year 1990

## ABSTRACT

Among those who share the responsibility for developing the reading habit in children are the child's family, schools, libraries, publishers, booksellers, and the mass media. There are many ways to read, just as there are many kinds of reading materials, including poetry and narrative stories. Some children read only to follow the plot, others add meaning to the plot based on their own experiences, and others create stories themselves. Every child should be given the opportunity to create. Some children use reading to acquire facts. Helping build vocabulary and suggesting how information can be located and used may be the most profitable way to help such a child. Parents may be the greatest influence in helping their children become readers. Before children learn to read, their parents should become role models of reading, help the children differentiate and name colors, play word games, and read aloud. After children can read, parents should continue to model reading, discuss what they are reading with their children and invite the children's comments, and set aside time for family reading. Parents should avoid closing doors to books and ideas, making discussions about books into a testing situation, and forcing a child to read a book without previous discussion about it. Schools should promote reading by making sure students know that reading is a tool, encouraging children to take books home, and challenging students to think about, discuss, and argue about what they are reading. (CML)

\*\*\*\*\*  
\* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
\* from the original document. \*  
\*\*\*\*\*

65 055 159

ED321062

# LITERACY LESSONS



INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

## Developing the reading habit in children

by Ralph C. Staiger

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION  
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS  
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

*Staiger*

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

We enjoy doing the things we do well. A good football player enjoys outwitting the opposition as the ball moves toward the goal. A graceful dancer enjoys the movement, rhythm and the music, and is likely to seek additional opportunities to dance. And so it is with many adults and children. We like to do what we do well.

Reading is no exception; good adult readers are more likely to reach for a newspaper or a book than a person who must stumble along pronouncing each word, and often losing the meaning of what is read.

A child who is a slow, halting reader avoids reading even the most beautifully illustrated storybook. He may try to understand the gist of the story from the pictures, for he understands that there is meaning in a book. His attempt is commendable, but his enjoyment is limited. And it certainly does not foretell the development of a reading habit.

*Creating readers who can deal with words in many contexts is an important first step in creating a child's reading habit.*

Many people believe that the first step towards reading takes place in a school, and that the teacher has the primary responsibility in guiding those steps. This is not wholly true, for before school starts the child has experienced several years of life, and dealt with words and ideas long before the first day of school.

There are many others who share the responsibility for planting the seeds of the reading habit among children. All of them will profit from the knowledge that humans enjoy doing what they do well.

---

Even before school starts, a child experiences much within the family circle which leads to reading. When he has learned to read, the availability of reading materials becomes critical. In addition to the family and friends, libraries, publishers and bookstores help provide books which help create the habit of reading. The electronic media play an important role too, for films, radio and television help build the world of ideas which a reader needs.

● *Family*

Mother, father, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and grandparents, not to mention friends of the family, provide the most important early experiences that build concepts and attitudes which create a successful reader. The disposition of the family toward ideas, toward books and reading sets up important values which may stir even the youngest baby.

The infant in a mother's lap who is read to – even if the stories are not understood – learns that reading is a comfortable experience, and that words and pictures must be good. Later, when the stories become pleasurable on a different level, this attitude will continue. It is never too early to start!

Reading to children should continue long after they have begun to read for themselves. School reading books provide some reading experience, but they are meant to teach children *how* to read, and cannot be expected also to ensure that the learner will derive lifelong pleasure from reading. A mother's – or a father's – reading a great story can entice a reader to enjoy better and more difficult tales.

Stories have been told from time immemorial. For many centuries, oral story-telling was the only way a

group's memories could be passed on, and great stories told and retold. The narrative tale is a universal way of thinking, and what better way to develop thinking abilities than by hearing a tale – often many times over – by an ancient grandfather who loves to retell it.

Great, and not-so-great, stories can be told by not-so-ancient parents, too. They may want to *read* them instead of relying upon memory. Either way, children profit. By listening to their parents reading aloud from books too difficult for them to read themselves, the young learners find how complex stories take shape and how words are used. Their understanding of what books can be is enhanced, and when they later encounter these stories in their own reading, they are meeting old friends.

All of this takes a busy parent's time. But it is well worth the investment. Setting aside a definite daily period for family reading can be done effectively in several ways. Instead of the parent doing all the reading, several children might share parts of their books, and talk about what they are experiencing in their reading. An elder child (or a parent) might start a sentence – or a paragraph – and have a younger learner try to finish it appropriately. The resulting discussion (or argument) is a useful way to develop vocabulary, to learn about language structure, and to develop social skills. With adequate adult watchfulness, much can be learned about disagreeing politely and behaving responsibly.

Perhaps the most important parental contribution after setting the stage for reading and other intellectual activity is to make available books and materials for the readers in the family. This does not necessarily mean *buying* books or journals, but may involve going to the library, borrowing books from friends and neighbours, or making available other sources of books. Parents should make getting books to their children a high

priority. It is quite literally providing information and education, not just providing paper with printing on it.

There is evidence that even in the most depressed economic conditions, whether a child becomes a reader or not depends upon a role model in the family who is a reader. Perhaps an uncle whom the child sees only once in a while, but who talks about what he has read, or brings a small book for the children he visits, becomes the person to be emulated. This adult gives something very precious – an example which provides the impetus which helps children become readers.

#### ● *Schools*

It is obvious that schools are responsible for sharpening the reading abilities of young people. Yet they cannot be expected to perform the entire task of shaping perceptual skills, providing experiences and motivating each child for a lifetime of reading. Schools should do everything they can to create literate members of society, but others also have responsibility for this awesome task.

Whenever possible, reading should be a positive experience – challenging but pleasurable. Teachers can do much to create an atmosphere in which learning will not be a dreaded memory. We have heard of extreme cases in which a sharp-tongued teacher has ridiculed a poor reader. Soon the other pupils join in. This is inexcusable. It may teach the victim to avoid reading for life.

As with parents, a teacher who reads to the class from books which the teacher enjoyed (which may be above the class reading level) plants seeds for future adult reading. Not only is an example being set, but the teacher's enthusiasm may be catching, and the students' curiosity aroused. Poetry particularly lends itself to oral reading. It is usually not lengthy, easy to pre-

pare, and when properly read can create enthusiasm for reading similar works – aloud – by the children.

*[There is] evidence that reading stories aloud to children is a significant source of vocabulary acquisition, that teachers' additional explanation of words as they are read can more than double such gains, that the new learning is relatively permanent, and that students who score low on vocabulary at the outset can gain at least as much as students who score higher.*

Elley, W.B. Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading research quarterly* (Newark, DE), vol. XXIV, No. 2, Spring 1989, p. 185.

How can a teacher, or a parent helping a child, be certain that the materials are not so difficult that they discourage the fledgling reader? This is not easy. One way is to let the reader choose the book. A child's high interest in a topic, special previous experience with the vocabulary of a selection, or skilful anticipation of the context of the material can make difficult materials easier to deal with.

In general, a child or an adult gets more satisfaction from reading materials which do not overwhelm by their complex subject or style. A person who selects material to be read and is comfortable with it is likely to want to read more. Success breeds more success.

*No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting.*  
Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

#### ● Libraries

Public and school libraries have encouraged the reading habit for many children. Where these do not exist, a generous adult book-lover may encourage diligent young people to browse in a personal book collection. When trust has been established, books may even be borrowed from this generous source! Borrowing requires a high degree of motivation on the part of the

young reader. Occasionally, several children together might make the long walk which may be required. This adds a desirable social aspect.

A friendly, attractive public or school library can encourage the reading habit. It can also help build a nation. In the long run, money spent for books, journals and newspapers which students may consult in an open, pleasant, well-lit atmosphere is as important as a playing field for educating young people. A wasted mind is a terrible loss.

Librarians who willingly recommend books and assist students in finding materials cultivate the soil of readership. They know that interesting treasures when hidden on bookshelves serve little purpose. Guidance to these treasures is invaluable to the young reader.

*[The school librarian] stopped me one day at the checkout desk as I was departing with an armful of P.G. Wodehouse and Little Maids. She added an anthology of Emily Dickinson on the stack and said matter-of-factly, 'I think you might like this, too.' I sat up half the night, awestruck. This was my first awareness that writing might be more than a diversion - for both reader and writer - that it could also be a centering on the most deeply felt of our experiences as human beings.*

Jean Merrill

#### ● Publishers and booksellers

The cost of books is high. Keeping costs down and quality high is one of the constant responsibilities of a good publisher. Paper costs alone are prohibitive in many places; printing and binding are equally costly. Authors and illustrators must be rewarded for their important contributions, as must editors. And some books do not sell enough copies to cover their high costs. Governments often assist, and should, for the nation profits from a reading public.

In many places, distribution is an enormous impediment. Even if a buyer knows what is wanted, obtaining

the copy is delayed by shipping difficulties, legal problems and financial obstacles along the distribution line. Where good distribution is most needed, it is often lacking, in developed as well as developing countries. But in developing countries this is disastrous, for the need is greatest. Governments should remove obstacles to book distribution as policy for the public good.

Where good bookstores exist, they can be of great help in creating good readers. Some specialize in children's books; others have a comfortable area where children can conveniently browse and decide to buy books, while their parents do the same. Friendly service and good stock are the keys to success in almost any retail establishment. It is true of bookstores, too. The profit margin should not be begrudged, for profits are low.

#### ● *The media*

Newspapers, journals, radio and television also share in the responsibility for creating children with the reading habit. The media are dependent upon the written and spoken word, and profit greatly from a literate society. Television depends upon scripts, as does radio for the most part. The written word is more obvious in the world of newspapers and journals.

Editors and producers, by acting positively to promote reading and writing, will help in the long run not only themselves but also the community at large.

On Montaigne, the French essayist:

*He was not a regular, laborious reader, but loved to sup here and sample there, to roam and browse and chew the cud. He frankly admitted a preference for desultory and idle reading which many were apt to condemn, but which had its place with him.*

Holbrook Jackson

Just as there are many kinds of reading materials, there are many ways to read. Although some may believe that the act of reading is always identical, this is only true when an individual has not learned, consciously or unconsciously, to vary his reading with the purpose at hand. Reading a recipe is different from reading an item in the newspaper.

Someone who thinks that there is only one kind of reading is likely to be a person who reads only one kind of material. Thus a child whose only reading experience is with narrative stories may not know how to enjoy reading poetry. Following specific written directions can also be an ordeal for someone who is not prepared to read directions properly.

For most children, stories are the commonest and most enjoyable kind of reading. Even with stories, however, different reading approaches are the norm. Some children may race through a story to find out what happens. Others may go beyond the plot. They add meaning (usually based on their own experiences) and use reading as a launching pad for imaginative thinking and acting. They are not bound by the words of the story.

Such children may become, through their creativity, an asset to the artistic world. They may create, because it is within them to create.

Every child should be given the opportunity and be encouraged to create; some will be more successful than others. Their early attempts to write should be encouraged, for a writer is likely to become a reader. Adults should remember that spelling words correctly is an acquired skill. It is not necessary for a child's stories - or any writing - to be spelled correctly according to dictionary standards, even though it may distress

the adult reader. In most cases, when correct spelling is needed, it can be supplied.

*Reading is more than decoding letters and words on a page. Reading is understanding, absorbing, wondering at, getting lost in the story or the information that the letters and words convey. Those of us who are readers... know how important books were to us in childhood, know that we were affected more strongly and deeply by the books we read then than by most anything we read now.*

Elizabeth Gordon

More literally-minded students use reading primarily to gather and deal with information. They use reading to obtain facts, and while they may appreciate an imaginative story, prefer to use reading as a knowledge-gathering tool. They have little difficulty in following specific written directions once they understand that the best approach is to read to understand the complete set of directions, get the equipment and supplies ready, and *then* follow the time-line of the directions from the beginning. Helping build vocabulary and suggesting how information can be located and used may be the most profitable ways to assist such a child.

Librarians are usually trained searchers for information of all kinds. They know how to use reference works and can almost always support the information-gatherer's need to know and suggest where to look.

Ideally, a child combines imaginative and literal reading. A balance of the two serves the whole person, as well as society. There are many variations beyond these two kinds of readers. All of them, however, require that materials be available. This should be our main task.

---

Parental influences are great in helping their children become readers. In fact, they are probably the most important.

● *Before the child learns to read*

Most parents do not realize that they can help accomplish this ambition almost from a baby's first day. It is never too early to expose a child to experiences which will be useful in school and in life.

Parents who read, themselves, are likely to have children who read. A role model is a powerful but subtle motivation for a child to use reading 'like mother and daddy do'. But active teaching of basic concepts, ideas and attitudes is also the responsibility of a parent.

Learning to differentiate between colors, to recognize them and to name them may seem rudimentary, but it is an important building block, as are many other concepts and experiences about which a child will be expected to know. Such knowledge will help the child eventually learn to read.

Words and language, of course, are what the child will eventually read; exposure to language – just talking to the baby – and gradual exposure to language which has meaning for the child – are important. As children grow, they usually enjoy word play and word games which help them show their mastery over words. Parents and the entire family can join in the fun of playing games with words.

Reading aloud to a young child is also, as previously suggested, a means of signifying that the parent values reading. Most children also enjoy the comfort of hearing the same familiar stories over and over. Sometimes they gleefully finish sentences. This does not mean that

it is no longer necessary to read that story. The child is showing appreciation and that learning from the story has taken place.

Children's interests and attention spans vary; some maintain regard for what is read, even if the story is from adult materials which the parent enjoys, and would like to share. When it becomes obvious that the child is no longer paying attention, it is time to shift to books which more closely adhere to the child's level of interest. The parent's obvious interest and enjoyment is eloquent, however, whether the materials are easy or difficult.

● *After the child reads for himself*

The example of parents who read continues after the child has learned to read. Parents who discuss what they have read and invite their children's contributions to the conversation are directly influencing their children's reading development. Parents who enjoy literature present good role models for future readers.

Parents must remember that each child is different, and that one may be more mature and forthcoming than another. Involving everyone in family conversation is a delicate but rewarding activity.

Television and radio can often be useful instruments for discussing plots, language usage, and for evaluating the worth of a specific programme collectively. Mass media programmes can – and often do – lead to reading more about a topic or a subject. Here the guidance of a librarian who knows how to locate the appropriate book is especially useful.

If television viewing has become a problem, with children spending an inordinate amount of time mindlessly watching the set, it is sometimes necessary to limit the amount of viewing time, and also to help children decide which programmes they will watch. We must remember that television is a source of learn-

ing about many things; it should be used with cooperative judgement.

13

Setting aside a time for family reading – an hour during which parents and children read something of interest to them – is especially useful in families which discuss their reading as a matter of course. If the reading hour is perceived as a form of punishment, it can backfire.

● *Parents should avoid*

(1) *Closing doors to books and ideas through unwitting ridicule, verbal or subconscious. 'What, nose in a book again!' even if said in jest, can quench a child's interest quickly.*

*If you read a book because you are forced to, you remain outside of it and speak of it as a robot... But the book itself is dead. Children forced to read by their parents know how reading can be utterly denatured. The effects can last a lifetime – a lifetime in which a book is something forbidden, unapproachable, an object of fear.*

Marguerite Duras

(2) *Making discussion about books and ideas a testing situation, with penalties for answers which do not agree with a parent's preconceptions of the subject.*

(3) *Forcing a child to read a book without previous discussion about it. When reading is a voluntary activity, it is much more likely to be relished and continued for life.*

● *Schools promote reading*

Some schools have the reputation for killing the desire to read. This is not always true, but mindless procedures and activities have often done more harm than good, and have produced students who avoid reading. Here are a few of the many ways in which schools can help lifelong readers.

(1) Make certain that students know that reading is

an important tool, not just stories which must be read from books.

To keep young people reading,

*Surround them with materials within their spectrum of reading.*

*Ensure that they read within a supportive, non-threatening situation.*

*Give them time to read.*

*Make it possible for them to share their reading experience.*

*Make sure that subject matter is readily available.*

Carlsen, G.R. *Books and the teenage reader.*

2nd rev. ed. New York, Harper and Row, 1980.

(2) Make reading more than the recognition and oral pronunciation of words.

(3) Have many books available for free reading. A school library should be available to all.

(4) Encourage children to take books home, to discuss with their parents and grandparents, who might also read them for the first time. This promotes adult literacy, as well.

(5) Avoid, whenever possible, making reading a boring task, with many routine drill activities which deaden interest.

(6) Challenge students to think about, discuss, and even argue about what they are reading, and have read. Get them involved with ideas.

---

In 1982, a World Congress on Books and Reading was organized by Unesco in London. Adopted was an observation which stated that books are pre-eminent as vehicles for information, culture and recreation, serving national development and the enrichment of human life, as well as fostering better understanding between peoples of various cultures.

The Congress also recommended:

- that governments and leaders recognize the role of school and public libraries in making books available;
- increased production and distribution of good quality school manuals and textbooks, which remain one of the least expensive ways of educating children;
- that the vigorous efforts to promote readership by encouraging the writing, production and distribution of children's books, especially in national languages, be continued, remembering in particular the importance of books outside the education system.

*One of the most conspicuous shortcomings in African writing and book production today is the paucity of creative literature for children and young adults (aged 4-15 years). It is a case of neglect that is all the more serious because special institutions have been created for scholarly publishing, textbook production and mass adult literature with state support, but none for children's literature [...] Although children form 40 per cent of the population, their books represent only 5 per cent of African publications.*

Kotei, S.I.A. *The book today in Africa*. Paris, Unesco, 1981, p. 153.

But, it reported, increased book production cannot be the sole target, but must be accompanied by vigorous efforts to promote reading among the millions of potential readers throughout the world.

A reading society is one in which every individual can read, and where books are an integral part of daily life. Young readers are the most important assurance that a nation will become a reading society. The responsibility for creating lifetime readers is a broad one. Family, school, libraries, publishers, bookstores and the mass media share in this responsibility. In addition, every literate adult has the responsibility for showing children the values of reading and for helping them become lifetime readers.

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Ralph Staiger to the cause of Literacy. Mr Staiger served as Executive Director of the International Reading Association for twenty-two years before his retirement in 1984. He is chairman of the International Book Committee and is the author of over fifty publications about reading.

This document is available in English and French and can be freely reproduced, and translated into other languages. It would be appreciated if a copy of any publication reproducing this text in full or in part could be sent to: (1) ED/PBL, Unesco, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris, France, and (2) IBE, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.

Readers are reminded that the opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Unesco. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Unesco Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.